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ADULTS IN TRANSITION.

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THERE IS A LACK OF THEORY AND EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING ADULT DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN THE AGES OF 30 TO 60. THE POSTULATE THAT THIS PERIOD IS CHARACTERIZED BY STABILITY IS QUESTIONED. EXPLORATION TAKES PLACE ALL THROUGH LIFE. ITS QUALITY AND FOCUS MIGHT CHANGE, BUT THE PROCESS IS THE SAME. DEVELOPMENTAL MODELS COULD PROVIDE A MORE COMPREHENSIVE BACKDROP AGAINST WHICH TO EVALUATE PEOPLE IF THEY WERE CYCLICAL RATHER THAN LINEAR. A STUDY OF MALES-IN-TRANSITION, THOSE WHO REFUSE TO "STAY-PUT," MIGHT GIVE US CLUES TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THOSE WHO CAN AND THOSE WHO CANNOT TRANSFORM, CHANGE, AND PROGRESS. CURRENT MODELS OF HUMAN GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT ARE NOT DESIGNED TO EXPLAIN CHANGE AND GROWTH. THE MISSING LINK IS THE PERSISTENT TENDENCY TO BECOME MORE FIT, MORE COMPETENT. THE NEED TO FEEL COMPETENT IS SELF-PROPELLING AND A POSITIVE EXPRESSION. COMPETENCY MUST BE CONSIDERED AS A CENTRAL CONCEPT IN UNDERSTANDING ADULT DEVELOPMENT, VIEWED IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT, AND INCLUDED IN DEVELOPMENTAL MODELS. TEN HYPOTHESES UPON WHICH TO BUILD RESEARCH ARE PRESENTED. TO FOCUS RESEARCH ON ADULTS-IN-TRANSITION WAS PROPOSED AS A BETTER WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT. THIS PAPER WAS PREPARED FOR PRESENTATION AT THE CONFERENCE ON THE TRAINING OF COUNSELORS OF ADULTS (CHATHAM, 1965). (RM)

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* ADULTS - IN - TRANSITION

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ADULTS - IN - TRANSITION

1. INTRODUCTION

The workshop theme could be taken from a statement of Erik Erikson's: "Identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all".[1] This is a workshop to stimulate us to study the possibilities of continued changing identities in adults. There are myths about adults. One is that patterns are so established in infancy that once they reach thirty all hope of change is over. Misinterpretation of research data gathered by Bloom[2] and Kagan[3] confirms the notion that we are what we were. The practitioner who studies such research and who is influenced by the cultural myths about age becomes confused when confronted with existentialist philosophy which can be interpreted to mean we are what we want to be - that we have the power within us to change at any time and at any age. Thus we are confronted with a seeming conflict between the determinists and mystics.

My bias will become obvious as I talk to you; and I like to believe that such a bias is central to the design and purpose of this workshop. I feel that change is not only possible but will, in fact, become more necessary with the changing economy and society. I am willing, however, to admit that surveys probably prove that most adults do not change and develop in young and middle years, but I am not interested in statistics. Rather, this week I hope we will further our exploration of a few adults who have or who are in the process of change. The study and concern with those who do and can change rather than with the many more who don't and can't change should help us as practitioners to stimulate growth and development in our adult clients.

2. ADULT DEVELOPMENT - FACT OR FANCY

Most developmental psychology takes us through the 20 to 25th year, leaves us, then picks us up again at 65. It almost seems as if those of us between say 30 and 60 are not developing but just moving along a predetermined road. Thirty years of a relatively short span are skipped, ignored, or worse yet, taken for granted.

There seems to be agreement about one aspect of the problem - our lack of knowledge theory of adult development. It is amazing that, with all the studies and volumes on child development, only a handfull of such studies exist in the area of our concern. The most extensive book written to date is Personality in Middle and Late Life by Bernice Neugarten of the University of Chicago. Although this book reports years of study with a group of adults in Kansas City, Neugarten writes that "knowledge of personality changes in the second half of life in meager. Relatively few empirical studies are available from which findings can be generalized, nor is there an integrated body of developemental theory that encompasses the total life span and that provides impetus for research in this field."[4]

Walter Fruen, one of the authors of Personality in Middle and Late Life points out that except for Maslow, Jung and Fromm most theorists view adulthood as a period of stability. Yet, even those theorists just mentioned do not deal systematically with adulthood. Only Erik Erikson who categorizes human development into eight stages, each stage representing a change in ego development, deals with the continous development of people from birth to death. And although Erikson describes the ego conflicts and crises of adulthood, Gruen points out he does so "summarily."[5]

Perhaps the scarcity of theory and research with respect to the problems of adult development, along with as apparent need for a theoretical framework for the pragmatic resolution of challenge, have pushed many to extend adolescent psychology until 35 and then apply disengagement theory to those over 35. Kastenbaum discusses the limitations of squeezing out the middle years when he writes: "It should become increasingly more difficult for theories of childhood or childhood-plus-adolescence to masquerade as theories of the entire life-span. In encountering the problems and challenges of later life the social sciences will have no choice but to grow up."[6]

Despite a lack of any overall theoretical basis, numerous studies have been undertaken to examine various aspects of adult development. These studies range from definitions of happiness and time by different age groups, to studies of TAT protocals. And yet, they do not add up to any consistent theory; in fact, they confuse students of adult development because the evidence is so conflicting. A perusal of Neugartens book in conjunction with Raymond Kuhlen's chapter "Personality Change With Age" in the book Personality Change,[7] exposes the student of adult development to the many conflicting, contrasting, and confusing studies in the area. To illustrate let me mention just a few studies. Peck concludes, for example that social-class rather than age is the significant determiner of change in middle years, and further that the lower the class the less well adjusted the person and the less possiblity for change.[8] In another study a sample of males and females were categorized along personality dimensions and then differentiated according to a Life-Satisfaction Index.

Personality types ranged from integrated at the healthy end of the continuum to introspective, defended, passive-dependent, constricted, and at the other end of the continuum, unintegrated. The less integrated the person- regardless of age - the less life satisfaction he experienced.[9] In contrast to these studies which establish that age is not the major factor in assessing change, we find a study where men and women were given the Draw- a- Person Test. The assumption of the experiment was that self-concept can be inferred from the size of the picture drawn. Men after thirty drew smaller pictures than those in their twenties; women's picture size decreased after forty.[10] So, apparently, women, we have an extra decade of expansiveness. Along these same lines, in a study of subjective happiness, people rate the twenties as very happy and thereafter their happiness ratings decrease.[11]

The discrepancies in these and other studies are difficult to understand despite Neugarten's attempt to explain them. In her summary chapter she categorizes those studies in which age does make the difference as dealing with "intrapsychic processes"; that is changing control over one's impulse life, inability to deal with the multitude of stimuli in the environment and decreasing biological efficiency. Age is not the determining variable when "socioadaptational patterns", that is the adaptive qualities of personality, are under investigation.[12] In this regard, Kuhlen points out that age is important only when taken in conjunction with other variable for instance, is one 45 and single, 45 and married with young children, 45 with grown children, or 45 widowed and poor.[13]

Neugarten further explains these conflicting data as resulting from

methodological problems. The captive groups available in childhood do not exist and the sample of adults willing to participate in studies might well be skewed in the direction of deviancy. Even when a representative sample is located difficulty areas in differentiating between cultural and individual change. The longitudinal study is always of value, but very expensive and difficult.

Despite these many obstacles to studing people in their middle years, Neugarten pleas for more and better research in the area. She gives her plea for more research an interesting twist - and one with which I am most sypathetic. She points to the need for naturalistic and inductive studies rather than the continued analysis of discrete and minute aspects of the personality. Those of us stimulated to conduct research in the area will hopefully demonstrate that adult development is fact and not fancy!

3. DISCONTINUITIES - A WAY TO STUDY CHANGE

Even though we have no accepted and established theory for our topic, we still need a framework to help us ask the appropriate questions. I propose a kind of limited empiricism-that we think about, look at, talk about adults-in-transition. That is, those people who have radically changed or reversed a "generally irreversible pattern."[14] Or to put it another way, let us look at people who experience discontinuity - changing radically their internal and external frame of reference and environment.[15] According to Donald Super[16] most adults between thirty and fifty are stabilizing their careers in what he calls the maintenance stage. Our concern, however, is with adults not following the usual pattern but rather those are rechrystillizing and reexploring future roles approximately fifteen years later than expected. Chronologically, they are at the maintenance stage, but developmentally they are exploring. But their exploration is qualitatively different from that of the late adolescent. And we have no framework to study those who develop idiosyncratically. Developmental models could provide a more comprehensive backdrop against which to evaluate people if they were cyclical rather than linear. That is, exploration takes place all thru life; it's quality and focus might change but the process is the same. The problem with the usual linear approach is clear when applied to adults-in-transition.

I propose, for several reasons, that we concentrate on those male adults who are in transition, for several related reasons. First, the literature and concern with changes in the middle years has concentrated on women. Eli Ginzberg arues, contrary to Betty Friedan and her followers who attempt to evoke sympathy for the woman's plight, that women have many more choices

and options availabe to them than men. Women can enter, leave, reenter the labor market and be considered interesting. The man who engages in prolonged role exploration is considered neurotic, confused, and unmasculine. Thus, my concern is with the male who refuses to "stay put", who feels he can still explore and who in fact is exploring. Roger Burchett, a faculty member at MacComb Community College, a doctoral candidate in our department, and a participant at this workshop recently completed a study of male adults in transition. He aptly titled his study "I'd rather Switch than Itch."

A further reason for selecting this group is that people in the process of transforming rather than those contempleting or remembering a transition can provide us with insights into the warring factions, uncertainties, ambivalences - in fact, the very nature of an adult going against the mainstream. This might give us clues to better understanding those who can and those who can't transform, change, progress.

Another reason for studying this group relates to my guess that we have many more people in this situation than we think; and further, that the numbers will grow larger. For example, Ginzberg found that 25% of his sample of educated women radically changed gears midstream. If 25% of his sample actually changed gears, can't we assume that as many men would also want to shift gears but are restricted by societal and personal considerations. A study of those who do shift can help us help others.

A final reason to concern ourselves with this group is, in essence, the basic reason. There is a tremendous need to do so. All the authors who deal in any way with this period point out the need for such studies. For example, "There have been few.... studies of personality changes in

adult life as people develop without the benefit of psychotherapy.... This is especially true for the exceptional but significant instances of people who even in their middle years, make drastic changes in their life orientation and goals.... which involve - at least on the surface - a giving up of almost everything they have been doing.... Prominent changes were in the areas of: (a) the deepening of interests, (b) the development of self-insight, (c) the development of mature relationships with people, and (d) the stabilizing of ego identity."[17]

I think we all might agree on the need to focus on this group - although for many another aspect of adult development would be more intriguing. With my interest spelled out, I would now like to make explicit my major questions which are put forth as a first step in developing some hypothesis upon which to build research.

1. What happens to those people who do change, who are transformed, who are in transition? The concern here is with the qualitative dimensions of adults-in-transition rather than a survey of how many do change in a given year on a discrete aspect of behavior.

2. Can naturalistic rather than experimental observation and study of adults-in-transition yield clues about the multiple factors which facilitate or prohibit change in the middle years.

3. Are there any commonalities among those who have changed? Was there a "critical incident" leading to the change?

4. When vocational development is reversed, does it result from severe incongruities between self-concept and opportunity through work to implement self-concept. Had there always been a discrepancy between their self-concept and behavior which finally erupted into a rechrystilization of "self-in-situation."

5. When adults make drastic changes in careers involving social mobility, do they define work and work satisfactions in a qualitatively different manner? Do these adults-in-transition see their former work in terms of extrinsic aspects (i.e. setting, hours, pay, supervision)? Do they visualize their current or future jobs in terms of work content?

6. Are adults-in-transition more future than past oriented?

7. Do these adults have conflicts in how the significant others in their works see their changes?

8. Do adults who are making changes see themselves as competent, self-propelling, autonomous individuals? Did they always see themselves in this way?

9. Are there any significant class differences in the ease with which transitions are made?

10. Are the assigned reasons for change as given by adults-in-transition the same as these ascribed to them by social scientists?

To summarize, many ways exist to study adult development. I have chosen to focus on adults-in-transition - that is adults experiencing discontinuity - as a way to better understand the process of adult development. To use Anselm Straus's words, we want to "capture the open-ended, tentative, exploratory, hypothetical, problematical, devious, changeable, and only partly unified character of human courses of action."[18]

4. COMPETENCE AND CONTEXT - EXPLANATIONS FOR CHANGE

These concerns and questions with change and the possibilities of transformation inevitably push one to explain how and why such changes occur. And the explanation of a process so little understood tempts us rigidly to adhere to any tentative framework precluding the continued assimilation of new data and new hypothesis. At the risk, then, of presenting a too-pat and an incomplete explanatory framework, I wish to share my tentative thinking with you.

In his many years studing human growth and development, Robert White of Harvard has been struck by the inadequacy of current models designed to explain change and growth. The missing link, according to White, is the persistent tendency to become more fit, more competent. This is not a negative drive; that is, one which exists solely to reduce tension, but rather it is in the same category as the child's propulsion toward continued exploration and manipulation of his environment.[19] This need then is a positive expression of the universal need to expand, explore and to achieve more mastery. White differentiates competence, "fitness or ability" from the more crucial construct "sense of competence" which is the subjective aspect of competence.[20] For example, we all know people who are objectively competent in a particular area, such as academic study, but who nevertheless, feel incompetent. It is our sense of competence or incompetence which can propal or block us in exploring new activities and situations. White illustrates that this need to feel competent is self-propelling and must be considered as a central concept in understanding adult development. I want to underline here that competence and sense of competence can be both negative and positive. We have many

examples of frustrated women who find little fulfillment or sense of competence in home and family so they turn to the world of work for substitute gratification. This is qualitatively different from the woman who is pushed into new activities out of a continued need to expand her sense of competence. This person needs to continue exploring, just as the infant continues to touch and pat every new object in his environment in effort at more complete control and achievement.

Lest you think that White is erring in the direction of attributing more potency than deserved to the single factor, competency, he writes "In the main, competence is not the most distinctive feature of interpersonal behavior, and its significance is sometimes overlooked."[21] Although White writes that the competence model must be used in conjunction with other developmental models, the omission of most psychologists to do so has made an understanding of healthy growth and change difficult, and stimulated White to over emphasize this construct. In context, it is proportional.

The drive to explore, to become, to reach new stages of competency must of course be viewed in a social context. Certain situations and periods in history allow more or different options than others. Nevitt Sanford in his new book Self and Society differentiates the "personality-culture" of the 1930's and the "person-in-a-social system" of the 1960's.[22] In the 30's it was enough to explain behavior as resulting from social class, ethnic origin, regional location; while in the 60's we explain behavior as resulting from cultural heritage but, and this is new, we add the dimension of immediate context as an influencing and change agent. An example at hand is the job corps training camps where youths are literally taken from one environment and placed temporarily in a new situation. This assumption, as yet untested,

is that immediate context can compensate for, or change one's behavior. I can't change my personal family background, traumas, etc. nor can I change the socio-economic class from which I originated, nor can I dismiss the fact that I am an American - not African -, woman - not man, 37 not 27, mother of one child and not three children. But what can be changed is the immediate context within which I function. And this change can facilitate growth and development. The perspective of context certainly offers tremendous possibilities for those trying to work with adults and particularly with poverty-striken adults.

Sanford helps us see how the formerly mystical notion that people can change if given second and third chances can become a reality if we try to look at the interaction of a person in a particular situation or environment. Let me illustrate this with some examples of what I consider to be among the most meaningful developments in the past decade. And that is the utilization of non or subprofessionals in education and social welfare, largely stimulated by the Economic Opportunity Bill of 1964. The point here is that many people have been recruited, trained and hired in meaningful work activities. These same people had worked in menial jobs and often had spotty and unstable work records. From personal experience in the training of three groups of people, I am convinced that if people are given an opportunity to make their day to day activities meaningful rather than meaningless and often degrading that these people will change, develop and become members of a stable work force. A young man told me that being a subprofessional was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. That before this he had been a janitor and hated his work. Now he felt his days would matter and he

would be doing something important. Just yesterday, a man from the first subprofessional training group in Detroit called me to request that I submit a letter of recommendation to Wayne as he is applying to the Liberal Arts School in hopes of becoming a lawyer. Countless examples like this could be cited.[23] The point is, that by changing a persons situation, often we can provide one with the nourishment to change, grow, progress. I postulate that people want to respect themselves, to become more competent, to contribute. We can help a limited few who cannot realize their competency drive, but I think the hope of tomorrow is a basic, working assumption that people can be helped to develop by working on their self-concepts and perceptions if at the same time the social system is changed in the direction of facilitating growth. The breaking of the bonds of frustration, the notion of hope and of potential, and the promise of "can" may sound like bromides - but, I suggest they are more real and offer more promise than tradition-bound, status quo resignation.[24]

5. THE WORKSHOP AND YOU

This workshop is designed to help us think through our attitudes about adults-in-transition, ways to work with and counsel adults, as well as to serve as a stimulus to all of us to develop meaningful research projects in the area of adult development. Hopefully, you will think together about your attitudes toward men wanting to change careers and your conception of the work and educational opportunity structure open to those in their middle years.

Are you an encourager or discourager? Would you support a woman aged 49 in her plans to attend night law school? Would you think it possible for a negro, male bus driver of 35 to plan on becoming a sociologist? Would you think it presumptious if a male janitor wanted to study a skilled trade? Would you accept a 60 year old teacher in a National Defense Education Act Guidance Institute? Would you feel a pragmatic union organizer in his mid-thirties would be unrealistic if he entired law school? Do you think medical school is prohibitive for those over 35?

These are examples of actual cases. Your answers will indicate some attitudes you have toward adults still in the process of becoming. Your attitudes, positive, negative, or neutral, will in fact affect your counseling and working with adults.

We might conclude my discussion of adult development by saying that adult development - a stage of development different from that preceeding and following it - is neither fact nor fancy. The hope is that some of us here in this room will be stimulated to work in this area and help develop a factual and conceptual framework for understanding this confusing, conflicting, and exciting period of development - a period in which most of us are currently functioning.

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